

## **The Notions of Omission and Disremembering** **in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

The two notions of omission and “disremembering” are part of people’s everyday life. There are many situations in which one might think that the wisest solution is to omit the bothering memories, just like tearing a page out of a book. These are usually troubling memories that hurt the person so much that forgetting them deliberately seems easier than accepting them as they are and leaving them as reminders of one’s mistakes or misfortunes. Here, the concept of disremembering can be seen as a synonym of omission; however, it is even more emphatic and means the process of forgetting something deliberately. That is, to disremember means a choice to stop remembering the painful or bad incident.

Can this process ever truly work? This is the question, Toni Morrison asks in her novel, *Beloved*. For Morrison, this process is often the root of future problems. In her novel, she argues that because no one – neither an individual, nor a community or even a nation - can entirely disremember something, its absence will never disappear, and thus it will come back to haunt the ‘disrememberer’ until he or she acknowledges its existence and importance. This acknowledgement, which Morrison terms “rememory,” is the only healing process of the problem. However, “rememory” is quite a difficult process even on the level of individuals, not to mention that of the American nation Morrison addresses in her text. By focusing on the tragic case of one individual family’s cases of “disremembering” and “rememories”, Morrison’s *Beloved* makes a powerful argument about the problem of the whole nation, consciously set in the times of slavery and Reconstruction in the United States. Her novel tells stories of a past that would rather be forgotten by many Americans, but which is totally unforgettable because of its huge impact on the present. In this way, Morrison’s use of disremembering and the omission of certain details, that are mostly visible concerning namings, are meant to show that those stages of our lives and our pasts that has a great influence on our present cannot be disremembered and, as such, cannot be considered as past at all.

When beginning to analyze Morrison’s work, it is important to note that she wrote her novel in 1987, a little more than one hundred years after the abolition of slavery. Looking on these one hundred years, it is more than clear that the healing process of America is still not over concerning the wounds that slavery has left behind. From one part, it is a feeling of guilt

that is tried to be cured by different types of political action. According to history books and the Constitution, three different Amendments were created between 1865 and 1870 that abolished slavery, gave the blacks full citizenship and finally the right to vote. (Pintér16.) Similar political actions have been created also towards the end of the twentieth century by which the government tried to help the African-Americans assimilation into the dominant society of the United States; the 1980s Affirmative Action is one example. The other side, however, consists of people whose wounds are still open, and who cannot get over the centuries during which they were slaves and who often sees that despite all the political actions not much has changed in the way they are treated in the US. This way, both sides have their good reasons to disremember, that is, to deliberately forget this segment of their pasts, even though it is obvious that they are still affected by it. One side tries to forget its guilt while the other is trying to do so with all the pain. The stories that are told by Morrison's *Beloved* serve as a mirror to this attitude towards tackling slavery at the time it was written.

Morrison uses past to create a different kind of history in her novel. The linear kind of history, well-known from history books is replaced by a circular one, where nothing can be considered past, where the facts never die. When her protagonist, Sethe, a former slave woman who literally crawls from a Kentucky plantation to freedom in the Northern state of Ohio, thinks back to her escape, she remembers the aid which came from the most unlikely source: a white girl. While Sethe, swollen with pregnancy and with feet almost falling off from exhaustion, the white girl, Amy Denever leans over to massage Sethe's soles and reminds her that: "anything dead coming back to life hurts" (Morrison 42.), Amy's words echo throughout the novel in order to refer to "rememory", saying that once one has disremembered his or her past, it is very hard and painful to be brought back. In this sense, the novel is filled with many characters and events that are tried to be disremembered and which do hurt when they are coming back to life in the course of the story.

The most important character of the novel coming back to life is the character of Beloved. It is her story, that is, the story of her death which is fully omitted and disremembered in the life of the community presented in the novel. "Beloved" is the name used to refer to Sethe's third child, a girl who Sethe killed in fear when the cruel slave master from whom Sethe herself escaped comes to Ohio in order to re-capture the family. This killing of her child in order to save her from a future of slavery, which Sethe thinks to be living death, is not a story that she or the community wants to remember. This omission is emphasised by the absence of Beloved's name. She is either referred to as Beloved or 'crawling-already', but her real name is never revealed or remembered in the story.

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? (Morrison. 323.)

These lines clearly show the community's attitude towards Beloved, but the words "how can they call her if they don't know her name" can also be interpreted as an allusion to slavery. By these words, Morrison suggests that without being able to explain something, one cannot really find a way to deal with it, nor can one understand it.

Still, Beloved cannot be disremembered, as she has a strong influence on also the family's and the community's present. She is absent from the family she used to belong to and the change in the relationship between the community and the family is also due to her. However, the more Sethe tries to disremember her murder or 'saviour', the more it haunts her. In this sense, Beloved is Sethe's ghost; she is "the manifestation of suppressed memories" as literary scholar Linda Krumholz puts it in her essay (Krumholz 400.). Krumholz goes on with this idea saying that Beloved is not only the ghost of Sethe, but also that of Paul D, who was a slave with Sethe, and who comes to live with her family in Ohio, and Denver, the fourth child of Sethe. It seems to be true enough if one considers that both Paul D and Denver are made to face their pasts by her the same way as Sethe is (Krumholz 400.). The more time Beloved spends in the house, the more Paul D and Denver want to know about her past and as such about their own pasts.

And Beloved is the reader's ghost, forcing us to face the historical past as a living and vindictive presence. Thus Beloved comes to represent the repressed memory of slavery, both for the characters and for the readers. Beloved catalyzes Sethe's memories as the novel *Beloved* catalyzes the reader's historical memories. (Krumholz 400.)

By saying this, Krumholz suggests that the readers become as inseparable characters of the novel, as those whom they read about, and, moreover, by making the readers involved, they also can be associated with omission and disremembering.

Omission and disremembering becomes even more salient when it comes to the name of the house the family lives in: 124, which, in my opinion, serves as an individual character in the novel has the past of the family as much as the concept of disremembering burnt into its name. The thing that makes it obvious that Morrison tries to tell the reader something by this number is the fact that whenever there is a reference to the house, it is always done by the number. Moreover, this is the very first word of the novel: "124 was spiteful." (Morrison 3.) Her conscious repetition of the number calls the reader's attention to the weirdness of it. The

more often one tries to pronounce it, the more likely it is that he/she will accidentally insert number three into the number of the house because three is the logical next step in the sequence. Morrison uses this number in order to show us, readers, how disremembering works. 124. Three is missing. Beloved is the third child of Sethe. The third child is the one, who is killed by her own mother, and the one whom everyone disremembers in order to move on, or as Morrison puts it: “So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep.” (Morrison 324.) And the reason why this number is so special is that it shows the actual effect of disremembering. Nothing can take the place of number three, like nothing can take the place of important events of our pasts. It will never be called 123, three being Denver, the fourth child of Sethe, since that would be a lie, and lying is different from disremembering since disremembering is unspoken, it is something unaccepted. So number three and thus Beloved seems to be disremembered, or vice-versa, but can it be fully omitted? Can anything with effects on our present day life be entirely forgotten? Is there no trace to remind people of its absence? Well, one has to seek the answers in the number, itself. Number three is not entirely forgotten, the community can never totally disremember it, because the absence will always be there, showing that something has been taken out, something is missing. Moreover, its existence becomes, in my opinion, even more striking by omitting it than leaving it there. The ghost is created out of this absence in order to haunt those people who want to disremember that cannot be disremembered in order to prevent it from happening. And the only way to cure this is “rememory”.

All of the main characters need to go through a process of “rememory” in the course of the novel, thus, it is not only Sethe, who needs to come to terms with her past. By treating 124 as a separate world, disremembering everything around it, Sethe forces Denver, her only child born outside of slavery, into a really difficult situation. Even if she only wants to save her daughter from the pains of her past, Denver will never have a future of herself. As Krumholz says, “the unacknowledged past keeps Denver from moving into the future. She is jealous of her mother’s past, and her exclusion from that past increases her loneliness and bitterness” (Krumholz 404.). Still, it is Denver, who is the first to be able to put the memories of Sethe and Beloved and thus also that of the community together and, as such, to help them.

Paul D, who wanders into 124 from his own painful past and eventually becomes Sethe’s lover, also suffers from disremembering his past as a salve man and, so, needs to “rememory” it. He suppresses, for quite a long time, how he was systematically humiliated by Schoolteacher, a man at his slave owner’s place, and how he was deprived of an identity of his own, as his name, Paul D Garner, suggests it. In this name, “Garner” refers to the owner,

whereas “Paul” was the name of almost all the slaves on the plantation and D. refers to his place in the sequence of the slave men. Although, Paul D, at the beginning of the novel, refers to his last name as Garner, by the end of the novel he accepts Denver’s calling him “Mr. D.” (Morrison 313. ). The “D” is part of a painful past, surely, for it represents a time when he was treated as an interchangeable object, not a full human being; he was just one in a line of other workers. And yet, the “D” is also what distinguished him. It was how Sethe, whom he had always loved, knew him by. In this way, a “rememory” or his own name becomes a healing for Paul D. He can drop the “Garner,” or the life of being owned, but he will keep the “D.” for it is part of a past that makes up his present.

At the novel’s close when Paul D rejoins Sethe and sees the destruction by Beloved, it makes him realize that they share the same past.

He wants to put his story next to hers.

‘Sethe’, he says, ‘me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.’(Morrison 322.)

Without realizing how many yesterdays they have, they could not even have any kind of tomorrow, and by this they are on the way of healing. Paul D, as he calls himself at the end of the story, as a clear evidence of the fact that he at last finds his own identity, sees that having someone with whom he can share his painful past helps him to accept it, and so, he will no longer has to escape and omit it.

The community as a group also has to “rememory” the past together. It is not until towards the end of the book that other members of the community also start remembering their pasts, and only this way can they accept Sethe’s deeds and the existence of the ghost. One neighbour, Ella, for instance, seems to share more than what one might think with Sethe. She also killed her child – a product of repeated rapes by her slave master and the master’s son – and while she initially sees Sethe’s murder as evil, she soon thinks that “[w]hatever Sethe had done, [she] didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present.” (Morrison 302.). Until she finds “something very personal in her fury” (Morrison 302.), that is, until she realizes that they have so much in common Ella cannot help Sethe. But once she is able to accept her own painful past, she is able to save Sethe from being pulled down by hers. As Amy Denver might put it, again, Morrison argues that “anything coming back to life hurts”. It is not at all easy for Ella, or for any of these women of the community to suddenly come together and save Sethe from Beloved’s ghost, but the fact that this ghost is the ghost of all of them, and the feeling that they share their pasts with each other make them be able to cope with it together. With this, Morrison suggests how slavery, as a still haunting segment of

past should be dealt with. Whatever happened in the past is the responsibility of the whole community, and cannot be solved on individual levels: rather, the community and, as such, the United States has to realize that the horrible past is shared by everyone, without exception.

What the community, together, and the characters, individually, do towards the end of the novel can be called reconstruction as a synonym of “rememory”. They all reconstruct their memories and stories to create one huge story out of it that becomes the story of everyone. Literary scholar Gayle Greene starts her essay with a very similar point saying that

Reconstruction is more than the period in which the novel is set: it is the task the characters face as they set about rebuilding the culture that has been decimated by slavery, learning how to love and trust and make the connections with others that will enable them to go on. (Greene 314.)

By this additional meaning of the word reconstruction the circle, created by the novel is completed. And the emphasis is, again, on the word “circle” in order to show how closely past, present and future are connected to each other.

To also emphasise the difficulty and ambiguity one might find when trying to tackle painful memories, Morrison in her last chapter puts several alternations of the same sentence: “This is not a story to pass on”. (Morrison 324.) The sentence means that the story should not be carried on as much as it means that it should be forgotten. With this ambiguity, Morrison suggests that a story like slavery or a story like that of *Beloved* cannot be continued because it reminds us of our wounds, still we can and should never get rid of it because it is part of the American people’s existence, and slavery, as such, is part of being American.

Morrison closes her novel with a forceful argument about the impossibility of ignoring the past. “If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not only in my rememory, but out there in the world. [...] I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is out there. Right in the place where it happened.” (Morrison 43.) These lines are here to close this paper because, by these words, Morrison is able to give the reader the most vivid picture of how disremember can never entirely happen and how things that are tried to be disremembered just circulate out there, in the world waiting to be “rememoried”.

## References

Greene, Gayle. Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory. In: *Signs*, Vol. 16. No. 2. pp. 290-321. The University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Krumholz, Linda. *The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved'*  
In. *African American Review*, Vol. 26. No.3. Fiction Issue. Pp. 395-408. Indiana State University, 1992.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Vintage, 2005.

Pintér, Károly. *Introduction to the United States of America*. Piliscsaba: Pázmány Péter Catholic University, 2003.